



"Marienbad" Revisited

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down, instead of spilling it out in a lengthy interview which covered the whole range of his work and many other subjects, he would have said all this more concisely. But the points are clear. First, the element of theatricality in the movie is emphasized (see also Milne's interview with Godard in *Sight and Sound*, Winter, 1962-63); and second, we are given a rationale for the obvious sketchiness of the film's development. We see his character in flashes, which is how he sees her, disjointedly, but progressively. An audience may or may not be interested in the flashes, but a critic should not accuse him of leaving things out (the obligatory scenes of well-written drama), any more than we should ask Velasquez to tell us a story.

NOTES

1. Tom Milne in *Sight and Sound*, Winter, 1962-63 also discusses the camera placement in Scene 7 (Nana talking with Raoul) when, for the most part, Nana's face is obscured until the conversation takes a surprising turn, and then suddenly we see her face, registering surprise.

2. Milne adds to this: "By this means (use of titles) attention is drawn away from the dramatic progress of Nana's story, and concentrated on her reaction to each event as it occurs."

3. Godard says, in the Venice pressbook: "Since the film is rather sad, then perhaps as with the law of contrast, dear to Renoir, Nana is often gay." Fieschi adds to this in his *Movie* review (#6) In *Une Femme Est Une Femme* "the moments when Angela smiles . . . are beautiful, or true (it is the same thing) because in the next shot she is crying; and vice versa: an alternating beauty and truth that is found again in *Vivre Sa Vie*."

4. Godard's use of close-ups to stay close to his actors and to give the sense of portraiture is discussed by Fieschi, *Movie* #6, and is taken up by Godard in his interview with Tom Milne in *Sight and Sound*, Winter, 1962-63.

NEAL OXENHANDLER

Marienbad* Revisited*There is no key to the film**

Marienbad criticism has tended, even when most favorable, to some kind of reductionism, that is, explaining the film in terms of something else. Even the excellent article by Jacques Brunius (probably the best introduction to the film in English),¹ is guilty of a reductionist approach. After first stating that *Last Year at Marienbad* is the greatest film ever made, Brunius proceeds to analyze it as a structure of images, linked by various types of logic, and explained ultimately by a psychological key. This key is the notion of the recurrent dream. He presents some plausible arguments for this interpretation. The very first words: "Once again—I walk on, once again, down these corridors . . ." suggest a recurrent

phenomenon. But are the recurrent images intended as dreams? Brunius adds: "The fact that, in the Narrator's recollection, several successive dreams are sometimes combined to reconstruct a single sequence of events, is, of course, sufficient to explain some sudden changes of light and unexpected changes of costume. They always signal the passage from one dream to another." Brunius convinces us of what we already know, namely, that the screen is admirably adapted to portray psychic life, and that in *Marienbad* we are inside somebody's mind—but there is no good reason for believing that this mind is dreaming. In fact, as we shall see, there are no literal answers to the questions: *whose* mind are we watching and *what* is going on inside it?

In his definitive study of Robbe-Grillet,² Bruce Morissette summarizes a number of theories that attempt to reduce the film to some kind of schema. He finds most useful that of Claude Ollier who sees the film typologically in terms of memory-images, desire-images, pseudo-memory-images, etc. Morissette adds other types of mental images such as hypnotic suggestion, concretized fantasies, mental blocks and resistance. Ollier proposes a "plurality of solutions" including the following: "X, already certain of his triumph, will carry off the young woman as soon as the play is over. When he enters the theater, the coincidence of his own words with the text of the play causes him to automatically recall past events . . .".

Morissette's summary of overlapping and contradictory interpretations makes it clear that *there is no key to the film*. This rules out hypotheses such as those of François Weyergans who sees in the film the myth of Death (Albertazzi) who has come to carry off his victim after a year of grace.³ The Chinese game of Nim played by Albertazzi and Pitoëff would be the traditional game of skill with the victim as stakes. Resnais says of this: "Yes, one can, of course, think of the Grail myth or anything else." A better analogy that has not been suggested is that of the Mystical Marriage. The Soul and the Divine Bridegroom can achieve union only after a lengthy courtship and, at last, a "dying" to the world. This once popular theme is, of course, alien to the minds of both Resnais and Robbe-Grillet. Resnais concludes: "But the film is open to all myths."

Weyergans also sees the film as a waking dream in which id, ego, and super-ego struggle, until the pleasure principle wins out. Resnais has told us that *Marienbad*, like *Hiroshima*, might conceivably be taking place in a mental institution. Albertazzi might be a psychiatrist and Mlle. Seyrig a patient suffering from amnesia. But an attempt to attribute sexual anomalies or neuroses to the characters is futile, although the use of symbols and the

secretive behavior of the characters encourage such analysis. Brunius imagines that Pitoëff is either the brother or father of the Heroine and that their relationship is incestuous; his evidence is ingenious but unconvincing.

The use of mirrors and photographs point to narcissism. Albertazzi's fascination with shoes indicates some kind of fetishism. Resnais says of all this: "There is a conscious utilization of psychoanalytic themes: for instance, the excessively large rooms, indicative of a tendency to narcissism. At one moment, Albertazzi heard shots, indicative of impotency. I finally cut them while mixing, because they didn't correspond to my idea of the character."

There is a *Gaslight* view developed at length by Morissette who stresses that Albertazzi acts upon Mlle. Seyrig by hypnotic suggestion. Morissette rejects the idea that Albertazzi may be an adventurer of the Svengali type as well as the possibility that he is a psychiatrist and Mlle. Seyrig his patient; this would be using an external key or grid to explain a work whose ambiguity is of another order. But hypnotism has familiarized us with mental states like those shown in the film; hence, our knowledge of hypnotism reassures us that the film takes place in the realm of the possible. Morissette also speaks of the theatrical and hypnotic effect of Albertazzi's voice.

Despite all these apparent "clues," we must not be misled into thinking that the film is a maze. If we look at *Marienbad* as a series of corridors that *must* lead somewhere, to some literal place, we will be disappointed. The corridors lead only to other corridors.

Emotion is the guiding principle

Nothing is harder to talk about than "emotion" (traditionally called in French drama criticism the *je ne sais quoi*), and that is one reason it is hard to talk about *Marienbad*. There are, of course, many aspects to emotion in a film. In *Marienbad* we have to talk about emotion as it is incarnated by the characters and then as it is reincarnated by the spectator.

What the spectator feels is closely related to the over-all tone of the film, what Resnais has called the "paralogic" that helped him and his actors as they searched, with sleepwalking lucidity, for the right feeling in each sequence. The entire film is based on a dominant chord that is intuitively heard if the spectator will "allow himself to be carried away by unusual photography, the voices of the actors, the sounds, the music, the rhythm of the picture . . ." For it is "a film aimed solely at his sensitivity and his ability to look, listen, feel and be moved."⁴

While Robbe-Grillet and Resnais are in agreement about the over-all tone of the film ("a rather ceremonious solidity, a certain slowness, a sense of the 'theatrical' and, at times, even those fixed attitudes and that rigidity of gesture, dialogue and scenery which seems to be a strange mixture of sculpture and opera . . ."),⁵ they have different views about emotion *as felt and conveyed by the characters*.

Resnais is primarily interested in "the play of sentiments." Not having waged Robbe-Grillet's campaign against the novels of Balzac, Resnais does not mind sounding like a nineteenth-century novelist interested in the "mechanics of passion." Where a nineteenth-century novelist (e.g., Balzac) assumes that the inner life is intelligible, Robbe-Grillet assumes that it is not; where Balzac assumes that dialogue is the rhetoric of passion, Robbe-Grillet assumes that dialogue falsifies passion; where Balzac assumes that action reveals character, Robbe-Grillet assumes that action conceals character. In all of their statements about the film, Resnais is closer to Balzac on this subject than he is to Robbe-Grillet.

Resnais wants to analyze character, he wants to make connections; he believes that something really did happen at Marienbad.⁶ Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, maintains only that we can perceive a series of "emotional states" that cannot be connected up in any rational way. The only kind of axis he avows in the film is a "persuasion" that we watch through a series of distorting lenses. We can never

know whether or not anything happened at Marienbad because we can never pass from the "inner" reality to the "outer" or vice versa. For Robbe-Grillet, the "logic" of the film lies in the progressively intensified emotions of the Narrator. The contained eroticism of the opening sequences builds slowly through various kinds of psychic images: memories, anticipations, repetitions, etc. The numerous "pairings," for example, would be an example of associative images. The actors in the play, the couple overheard by Albertazzi, the statue, the girl and Franck several times referred to, underline and amplify the anxieties of the main couple. The film culminates in a series of evocations of the bedroom and an explicit sexual act. But Albertazzi does not merely remember this act for himself, he must force Mlle. Seyrig to remember. When at last she submits, the film moves to a new emotional plane of acceptance and reconciliation (already prefigured at the start of the film by the actress in the play-within-the-play who says "Now I am yours").

From scene to scene there are three kinds of connections to be made, emotional, formal and literal. The film is worked out with great precision in respect to emotional and formal transitions. Robbe-Grillet has made a careful mosaic of images and events ("objective correlatives")⁷ whose emotional "charge" builds the classic emotional line. For instance, the first premonitions of the bedroom come in the bar. There is hubbub, a sense of social pressure; the bedroom memory flashes through like a guilty thought instantaneously repressed; the solitude of that room contrasts with the crowded bar. There is a clear antithesis here operating on several levels.

The images connect in all kinds of formal ways—as visual patterns, by rhythm, by play of light and dark; and surely it is thanks to Resnais that we feel a supersensory awareness of one character by another.

But obviously the literal meanings will be out of phase. The attempt to connect them up is only the vestige of bad habits, a kind of

mental literalism, a debris that must be swept away. We must learn instead to take for granted the "de-chronology" of the mind and emotions.

It is for temperamental rather than theoretical reasons that Robbe-Grillet creates characters who are withdrawn, aloof, and addicted to their own compulsive thoughts. They experience "fantasies of tragedy" and imagine rape, murder, suicide. Other people appear to them as automatons. Resnais has only partially overcome the paranoid tendencies so typical of Robbe-Grillet's novels. He only partially succeeds in giving the characters a mystery and charm that compensates for their coldness.

This brings us to the question of the spectator's emotions. What do I feel as I watch the film? First, a reaction to the over-all tone, a feeling of increased suggestibility and of being caught up in the meters of a litany or a spell. Blending with this and contributing to it, there is esthetic excitement at watching the unfolding of a marvelous construction, for I both submit to the spell and, at the same time, experience the intense concentration of mental energy that is stored in the reels of film. But what do I feel for the characters? Empathy, identification—love? Their coldness rules that out. Do I fear for them? Do I share the emotional anguish of the young woman who is making up her mind? Do I feel that Albertazzi is really offering "love, poetry, liberty"? His behavior is too rigid and formal, too compulsive, too reserved to tell me what that liberty might be. In fact, the atmosphere of the film is just the opposite of liberty. It is weight, oppression, anxiety.

I find *Marienbad* an extraordinary film but it fails for me precisely where Robbe-Grillet says it should succeed. It does not move me. This failure of the film to be a truly moving experience, to break down my resistance (not so great, after all, to experimental art) and to cause even some momentary shift of value, unlock some even fugitive but positive response is a tenuous but telling argument against the film; for what else does anyone have to go on?

The film is a revelation

Marienbad is, first of all, the revelation of a method or a strategy or a tremendously well-organized and brilliantly executed esthetic maneuver. We witness the creative mind functioning at peak efficiency in a very complex kind of area.

But we have seen that the film is meant to reveal mind or psychic life in a different way—as it is in itself. The basis for this concept of psychic life (not at all easy to pin down and, I suspect, confused when you get to the bottom of it) is the phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre. Resnais has betrayed on several occasions that he does not fully share this view, as for instance when he says, like some medieval metaphysician, "It is a film on the degrees of reality . . . in the first quarter of the film, there are things that possess a considerable degree of reality; one withdraws from these as the film unfolds; and it is possible that at the end, these elements begin to converge, that the end of the film may be the truest part." Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, has continually emphasized that there can be no distinction among degrees of reality. There is only one reality and it is shared by things and by persons alike.

The walls, the ornaments, the statue, the garden, the bedroom furnishings are all neutral. The people who move through these halls are also neutral, mere statues or reflecting surfaces. They have no life of their own. Yet as the camera lingers on these objects and these people, we are somehow drawn into their mute existence, as if there were life there after all—but it is a life that the camera itself gives to them. The ambiguous role of the observed world, in Robbe-Grillet's novels as well as in the film, is not to be explained merely by viewing objects and other characters as "supports" or objective correlatives for emotion; but rather by the fact that they are introduced into the order of mind where they are infused with the dye of consciousness. In the film, it is the shadowy luminosity of the

filmed image that contains this dye. As this dye spreads, meanings emerge in the observed world, they fuse and disappear like a phosphorescent emanation upon the surface of things. The time sense changes, events assume the rhythm of memory or desire, a half-forgotten fear rises out of glands and nerve cells. Yet though this world is in a sense created by mind, by the camera, it remains a prisoner of objects, of setting, of other persons. It is a prisoner of things and they of it. Finally, there is only one reality—the phenomenal world—the reality of appearance, and people are no more or less appearances than things, except perhaps in this, that emotions radiate *out* from people, while they merely cluster around things or glance off in other directions.

But if this is the reality that is being revealed, have Robbe-Grillet and Resnais invented an adequate mode of expression? What conventions have they developed to convey this new sense of psychic reality?

André S. Labarthe has seen *Marienbad* as a form of neorealism, a series of fragments without logical links: ". . . all the parts of the film are situated on the same level of realism . . . it is the viewer who structures the film, who establishes differences of reality." He is following Robbe-Grillet who says that "by its nature, what we see on the screen is *in the act of happening*, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it. . . . The essential characteristic of the image is its presentness." The degree of pastness must therefore be interpolated by the viewer.

Perhaps the term "irrealism" points more accurately to the character of images that cannot be placed once and for all on the coordinates of a specific realism. Images invented (or remembered from a distant "real life") by Robbe-Grillet, mysteriously reinterpreted and vivified from a verbal into a filmic medium by Resnais and his actors, reach us and are infused with our own dye of consciousness, so that a complex exchange takes place. The creators picture a world and picture themselves through the world, and I, in turn,

as I open myself to the film may (if the film is truly a revelation) rediscover the spontaneity and freedom of my own consciousness. I should, in other words, experience the quality of my own existence through the film. But here is where the film fails for me. I cannot find the quality of my own inner experience through *Marienbad*.

The conventions may not yet be adequate to psychic reality; or, if they are, the concept of psychic reality is a false one. Since I admire *Marienbad* without liking it, since I feel revulsion at the human image I receive from the film, my judgment on it goes against what I consider to be a false psychic content, a phony revelation.

Is man a surface or a center?

Robbe-Grillet has attacked those film conventions like the flashback, exposition, explicit motivation, etc., that situate the film in some specific so-called reality. He has chosen to abandon these props. The story doesn't happen "out there" in the "big world." The screen is now "inside the head of the Narrator." It shows us his imaginative, mental, and emotional life. Sometimes also, he is looking with the eyes of others, for the camera will occasionally adopt the Heroine's view or that of one of the bystanders. This is done without any conventional "sign" to alert the spectator. The net effect of the conventions invented by Robbe-Grillet and Resnais is to suggest that mental life is a series of detached mental states. The film evokes a flux of perceptions around an ambiguous and shifting focal point. Is man a surface, at best a locus for passing emotional states, or is he a center? There is a nihilistic attack on the human person here and a deliberate evasion of the most obvious evidence from introspection, reflexivity, memory, and the convergence and continuity of inner experience that man is not a mere surface but a center.

While Robbe-Grillet has reopened all the most vital questions about narration, time and space coordinates, characterization, etc., he has

done so in the name of a retrograde metaphysics (avowedly influenced by Behaviorism) that refuses personality, value, and even finally meaning in the name of a self-limiting "humanism" that is no humanism at all.

I do not see how Resnais, capable of the outcry of *Hiroshima mon amour*, can say that this world without context, without rootedness, without confrontation is *his* world. I know that it is not mine. It isn't possible for me to care whether these two sleek mannequins get together or not. But it isn't merely that they are sleek, suave, and from that *dolce vita* café society nobody can take seriously anymore. It is that, as *persona*, I can't reach through them any sense of human interiority, nor any sense of the value-creating center that each of us is for himself. The complexity of personality is equated to time-space relations. But memory, as Proust rediscovered it, creates not merely order—it creates the good and the beautiful. It creates *value*. Love, which is supposed to be the subject of this film, is precisely a value that is inexplicable in terms of what is seen on the surface, it is precisely the discovery of what is inside the skin, *beyond* appearances. Look hard at these characters. What can you see through them? Where can they go when they leave this place? This woman has given up her freedom. She hasn't found it. Neither has Robbe-Grillet.

Antonioni

Our special issue containing Ian Cameron's monograph on Antonioni is now out of print, but reprints of it, somewhat more fully illustrated, have been printed in England through Cameron's journal *Movie*; in the U.S. they are available for \$1.50 from Art Film Publications, Box 19652, Los Angeles 19, Calif.

NOTES

¹ Jacques Brunius, "Every Year in Marienbad," *Sight and Sound*, Summer, 1962.

² Bruce Morrissette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, Les Editions de Minuit (Paris, 1963). Several of the essays in this volume have previously appeared in the U.S. The essay on *Marienbad*, however, has not. This book poses in thorough and objective fashion the questions opened up by Robbe-Grillet's renewal of the esthetics of the novel.

³ *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 123, September, 1961. In addition to articles on *Marienbad* by Weyergans and André S. Labarthe, this issue contains a lengthy interview with Resnais and Robbe-Grillet. My quotations from Resnais are from that interview.

⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, "L'Année dernière à Marienbad," *Réalités*, October 6, 1961. Catharsis or audience reaction is different for different types of spectacles and different cultural settings and, of course, much more than a matter of being "moved."

⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Introduction," *Last Year at Marienbad*, Grove Press (1962).

⁶ "According to Resnais' diagram reproduced backwards in No. 123 of the *Cahiers du cinéma* and then correctly in No. 125, p. 48, the action that we actually see takes place between a Tuesday and a Sunday, cut by flashbacks that cover Monday to Saturday evening of a week past, this complicated by several more flashbacks to the second power and passages through a timeless zone. Without recutting the film, it seems at first impossible to exactly phase this schema with the text of *Marienbad*, unless one understands that the two actions, evoked in a parallel montage, evolve in a general movement 'toward the future' up to the last scene. This fits with Resnais' belief in a real past relationship of X and A, a belief that seems to have guided him while making the film. But Resnais willingly admits that the result, that is, the finished film, in no way requires this concept of the plot, and that in the last analysis this famous diagram was only a guide-line." Translated from Morrissette, p. 193.

⁷ T. S. Eliot's term, somewhat discredited by American critics, has been taken over by Robbe-Grillet.

[*Marienbad* is now available on 16mm from Audio Films.]